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THE MYSTERY THICKENS: HOW DID THE RUSSIANS LEARN U.S. SECRETS?
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A Soviet newspaper account of a spy bust last summer contains a taunting reference to the "premises of the intelligence department at the American embassy, which are reliably protected by the Marines." Now that quote is a piece of a puzzle.

"I suspect it could be a bit of Soviet humor. Or maybe it's just a coincidence," said one intelligence source, commenting on the account published

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June 25 by the Soviet government newspaper Izvestia about the detention of Eric Sites, a civilian employee of the U.S. defense attache in Moscow.

Mysterious coincidences plagued the Moscow CIA post through 1985 and 1986, as Sites and at least four other Americans stationed there were reportedly caught along with their Soviet contacts.

The string of reverses, which another intelligence source said left the Moscow CIA station "dead in the water," were blamed at one time on Edward Howard, a fired agent who began selling information to the KGB in 1984 and surfaced in Moscow last August.

Investigators are now trying to piece together the few wisps of evidence they have to determine how much damage stems from the sex-for-secrets scandal in which U.S. Marine guards are accused of being seduced by female Soviet employees of the Moscow embassy and allowing KGB agents to prowl sensitive areas of the building.

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Among the cases under investigation are the following:

In February 1985, the Kremlin expelled Paul M. Stambaugh, a second secretary at the U.S. Embassy. Three months later, the Russians announced the execution of alleged CIA agent Adolf G. Tolkachev, a Soviet defense researcher whom U.S. intelligence sources described as an expert on "Stealth" technology designed to make aircraft invisible to radar. Intelligence sources said Tolkachev was arrested as he met with Stambaugh.

A month later, the Soviet news agency Tass announced the expulsion of another second secretary, Michael Sellers, and Izvestia ran a picture of him disguised as a Ukrainian, wearing a false mustache and a wig.

On May 7, the KGB nabbed Sites "red-handed during a conspiratorial meeting ... with an agent recruited by American intelligence." Sites was found to be carrying invisible ink and other spy gear, and a "list of topics" of interest to U.S. intelligence, Izvestia reported on June 25, 1986.

"As for the Soviet citizen who is an American intelligence agent ... there is no doubt that he will get what he deserves," Izvestia said.

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Last fall, the Soviet Foreign Ministry identified a counselor at the U.S. Embassy, Murat Natiburoff, as a recently departed chief of the CIA Moscow station and on Oct. 19 ordered the expulsion of five American diplomats tagged as spies.

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About the same time, at least three other Soviet contacts disappeared, and intelligence sources believe they may have been executed. The Los Angeles Times reported last Saturday that six Soviet contacts had been killed, but that number could not be confirmed.

Figuring out how agents were uncovered is tricky, in part because Howard, a fired CIA agent, fled to Moscow before he could be interrogated. Intelligence sources say that before Howard was fired for personal problems, he was being trained to run agents in Moscow.

Furthermore, much of the evidence against the Marines is contradictory, say U.S. officials. They may never know how many times KGB agents entered sensitive areas in the embassy, including the communication vault and CIA offices, or whether they managed to steal codes or photograph secret documents.

"We are now sorting through the information we have, going back and trying to piece together what might have happened," said an intelligence source, who, like others quoted in this story, spoke only on condition he not be identified. "But if you start to comment, you send a message to the Soviets."Even the locked vaults of the CIA station would not have contained the names or other specifics about Soviet agents, according to an intelligence source, but while in the embassy, the KGB might have stolen codes and identified embassy officers with the CIA and the Defense Intelligence Agency.

Intercepting normal intelligence traffic might have provided the KGB important clues about the number and type of agents being run by the embassy, U.S. sources say.

At the same time, the KGB could have increased its already tight surveillance of embassy people suspected of espionage and, using such devices as "spy dust" and hidden transmitters, might have tracked their contacts with Soviet citizens.

Once a Soviet was under suspicion, intelligence sources say, he or she could be provided with false information which, if transmitted from the embassy _ even with its source disguised _ could have fingered the agent.

Running human agents in a totalitarian society like the Soviet Union is a tricky business, because of the natural suspicion of Russians toward

foreigners, because of the pervasive influence of the KGB and because the Communist Party and government control all the jobs.

The most successful such agent whose identity has become public was Oleg Penkovsky, a colonel in the GRU military intelligence agency. He reportedly provided the U.S. and British governments with information about the weakness of Soviet nuclear forces that proved critical in the Cuban missile crisis. He was arrested and executed in 1964.

Two other GRU officers, Peter Popov in the 1950s and Anatoli Filatov in the 1970s, gave U.S. agents important documents on Soviet military hardware and KGB operations, according to Jeffrey Richelson, an American University expert on intelligence.

The bulk of American intelligence on the Soviet Union comes in the form of communications intercepts, according to U.S. officials. But human agents can provide information not otherwise available, such as specifications of weapons still under research, the workings of secretive inner party circles, or even clues about intercepting and deciphering communications.

EDITOR'S NOTE _ Bryan Brumley, who covers national security issues in Washington for The Associated Press, was a correspondent in Moscow in 1981 and 1982.